

A STORY OF HEALING

Théâtre DioNyse-Montréal

by Louise Rosenberg

A summer night's dream at Ahuntsic Park

Evoe! Evoe! Dionysus is freed !!! I cry out with joy. Three young girls have joined our cortege. They have put on the Bacchae and Maenad costumes and are singing with us. A man and two women, one with her baby in her arms have joined us for the finale. I hold the hand of a woman I do not know. We sing together "*we are a circle within a circle with no beginning and no end*"¹. She smiles at me with an open heart. I am moved and I feel grateful for this moment of shared grace.

*May happiness fall on us like rain
Bringing hope to men who no longer want to suffer
Joy and pleasure are vocations of the living
May happiness fall on us like rain*²

This was one of our performances in the park, just steps away from *Prise II*, where I have been participating in a theater workshop with Dr. Vitor Pordeus.

A return to the theater

I remember the first time I attended Vitor's workshop. It was eight months ago. My friend Céline had told me about it. It had been a long time since I had set foot in an alternative mental health resource. Six years ago, I retired from a social worker job on a psychiatric ward of a general hospital. My recollection is that I was very tired and happy to leave. But today it was not the social worker who was attending this workshop at *Prise II* - it was me, Louise, a 66 year old woman who lives alone and who is doing her best to live her life with meaning. At the time, I was participating in the organisation of a symposium on the theme of art, life stories and intervention, and I thought this young transcultural psychiatrist who healed with theater would be an interesting speaker.

My intuition was correct and the very first time I met Vitor, I was touched by his passion, his authenticity and I was fascinated with the ritualized theater he was offering us. I was seduced by the cadence, the music and the improvisation. To my surprise, I found myself playing like a child. During my childhood and throughout my youth, theater was a passion, a dream I had long forgotten. I realized that the child in me was painfully yearning to play. This

¹ "The Circle" of Pajé Amouri Gurgel

² Words inspired by Spinoza to the tune of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy".

child who had been hiding away in the depths of my Psyche had just awakened. She wanted to play, cry out, get intoxicated with pleasure and freedom.

My madness

Since the death of my father, when I was 11 years old, I have suffered from what I call chronic underlying sadness. Five years of psychoanalysis did not heal me. During my 30 years of social work in psychiatry I have learned that psychotropic drugs do not cure anything and can cause more serious health problems. I have learned that all psychotherapies, whatever the approach, psychodynamic, cognitive, humanistic or other, can provide relief from suffering, but this is often at the cost of becoming chronically dependent on the person of the therapist...

More recently, in the process of completing a masters degree, I am learning that through first person autobiographical research, and mythologizing my life story, I can create new meaning. I now see research as an act of self-empowerment and increased awareness. This is healing. However, the performative writing that I have made my methodology is a solitary act. I am missing the encounter with the other in the flesh as well as the movement of my body in space. I feel that there is a split, a wound in my body, an abyss to cross which I can't seem to put into words. Vitor's theatre is giving me the physical and interactional experience that I don't find in writing, as well as the mythological storytelling that I love.

Knowledge is not some free-standing entity in its own right; it should be understood as threaded through practice, performance, in a world which cannot be itself reduced to knowledge. I am inclined to say that performance is the ground from which knowledge emerges and to which it returns. (Pickering, 2007, p. 44)

The virtue of knowledge lies not in its transcendental truth but in its usefulness in our performative engagements with the world. Knowledge is engaged with performance; epistemology with ontology. (Pickering, 2010, p. 151)

What I also like about this theatre workshop is that it has intrinsic political and social significance. It is open to everyone, with or without a psychiatric diagnoses; mental health workers as well as patients, students, people on the street, men, women, children, anyone interested. In this adventure, we are all actors playing in the streets of our city. During my years of work in mental health I have learned that human suffering does not fit neatly into diagnostic criteria and these categories mainly serve to marginalize people and exclude them from social life and responsible citizenship. On the other side of that fence, those who consider themselves "normal" often suffer from excessive control of self (and others, if they have any power). I admit that I have long suffered from an excess of reason and self-control, from fear of knowing my own madness, well hidden behind a socially acceptable mask.

The dream of reason produces monsters

The dream of reason produces depression

The dream of reason produces anxiety

*The dream of reason produces schizophrenia*³

Theatre is ritual

For Vitor theatre is a ritual and so is the actor - the sound of the drum, the tambourines, songs and dance repeated over and over again, like mantras or prayers. *"Dithyrambo, Dithyrambo. Ô Dionysos, what can I do?"* It's contagious. It's like rediscovering a part of my memory, reawakening the ancestors. When I play and I improvise from this place, I feel in dialogue with all of humanity, in a language that crosses all cultures and all time. I am beginning to see the "collective unconscious" as a real place where one can live, rather than an abstract metaphysical concept discovered by Carl Jung I can actually go there, to experience real encounters, to be touched and to touch others, to reinvent myself. Our rituals take me into what Henri Corbin calls the *imaginal world*⁴, a realm somewhere *between chaos and order* (Cheetham, 2000)⁵. I can finally let go of the illusion of certainty and be a little "crazy". What a relief! *Evoe!!*

But this is madness with purpose. Rituals bring us to this place where we can let go of what we know to discover something new. It helps us live and traverse life's passages. In our postmodern world, we have completely abandoned the practice of rites and rituals and I believe most of us suffer from lack of meaning. Since the beginning of time, rites of passage have existed in all cultural traditions (Van Gennep 1981) to help humans navigate through life. Bouchard (2013) proposes four main characteristics which constitute a rite of passage:

La première fonction concerne la narrativité. [...] pour que le sens se dévoile, l'expérience doit être soumise à l'épreuve du dire, du récit; il s'agit de raconter l'innommable, l'inédit et l'inter-dit. Une deuxième fonction a trait à la force reliante du rite. Le rite donne à communiquer, donne à échanger, à faire passer. Il ne se vit jamais seul, il ouvre sur l'indépassable de l'autre, de la communauté. Une troisième caractéristique du rite réside dans son caractère éducatif, voire initiatique. Le rite est un espace mémoriel et permet la transmission des modes de faire et de penser [...]. Il réinsère l'humain dans le temps long de la succession des générations et la sagesse des anciens. [...] Le rite réinsère la personne dans la logique du don et lui permet de reprendre sa place au sein de la communauté des humains (Goguel d'Allondas, 2002) (Bouchard, 2013, p. 53)⁶

³ Inspired by Goethe's Faust

⁴ www.universalis-edu.com.proxy.uqar.ca/encyclopedie/monde-imaginal/#titre-i_96848.

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⁵ Dogmas, Idols and the Edge of Chaos (2000) Tom Cheetham, *Human Ecology Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 68-71. College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, Maine and Unity College, Unity, Maine 04988 USA

⁶ Free translation: The first function of the rite concerns the narrative. [...] For the meaning to be revealed, the experience must be submitted to the test of communication - the story; it must tell the unspeakable, the unheard of, the untold... A second function relates to the power of the rite to bring people together. The rite favors communication, exchange, it helps to pass. It is never lived alone; it opens onto what is transcendent to the other and to the community. A third feature of the rite is its educational characteristic as initiation. The rite is a memorial space and allows the transmission of modes

I recognize all these elements in our DioNyse Theatre. We dare tell a story that communicates the unspeakable, the unheard of, the untold: the return of Dionysus, god of wine, theater and madness, and the sacrificial killing of Pentheus-Faust, the arrogant dictator and oppressor. This is a tragedy, a cultural exorcism. It is also poetry, mythology that connects us to our ancestors, to our collective roots. We are bringing to life the archetypes that haunt our individual and collective unconscious. We meet Dionysus, Agave, Persephone, Semele, Hamlet, Faust, Galileo, Zeus, the Bacchae, nymphs and other mythical characters, who help us understand who we have become and decide where we want to go. We also honor the ancestors who participated in the construction of our ritual, inspiring us the lyrics of our songs or the words of our improvisations. They are **Shakespeare, Haddad, Artaud, Brecht, Euripides, daSilveira and Spinoza** (SHABESS). These ancestors are at the heart of Vitor's method. Each one represents a step in this healing process. I have only begun to discover or rediscover their profound source of wisdom.

As in traditional cultures, our ritualized theater is enacted in public places within the city and thus contributes to the transformation of the entire community. Since the beginning of the summer, we play outside 3 times a week. We began practices in the parking lot of Prise II, then in the Park nearby and on Mount Royal at the foot of the statue of George-Étienne Cartier on Park Avenue. These public performances are always unexpected and surprising. We never know who we will be meeting.

It is difficult to put into words the experience of folie and joy, when passers-by join into our cadence. I suspect that healing occurs at a deep level in those moments. Whatever the pain, the suffering, the limitations that paralyze us, I think it is possible for anyone who partakes in this ritual to heal. For some, it may be the structure of the ritual that serves to contain and provide relief for overwhelming thoughts, fears or anxieties, for others it may be the unleashing of one's madness that frees them from the tyranny of raison. The characters we play allow us to explore parts of our Psyche that escape us, but that are forces running our lives. In the end, we might risk finding balance.

Theater is space and relationship

The mythical characters I play affect me intimately, as the drama of my own story unfolds into the tragedies of mankind. When I play, I feel my sense of self expanding as I am traversed by feelings and emotions that heal me. I feel pulled out of my ego, of my narcissistic isolation. It's very freeing. I go home feeling that my living space is more open. I move with more ease wherever I go. I'm more comfortable speaking to strangers at the market, on the street. I feel more solid and at the same time, more transparent; more embodied in my being in this world.

of doing and thinking [...]. It reintegrates humans in the succession of generations throughout time and the wisdom of the elders. [...] The rite reinserts the person in the logic of giving and allows him or her to resume his or her place in the human community (Goguel of Allondas 2002). (Bouchard, 2013, p. 53)

I was born in a culture and at a time when the importance of rational thinking was overly exaggerated at the expense of intuitive knowing. Like most people of my generation, I feel the split between mind and body, culture and nature. Acting helps me heal this split, because the only way I can play with authenticity is to embrace the present moment with all my senses and let go of my compulsion to understand everything, to analyze, to think too much and to want to control what will happen next. Then and then only, will my words match my actions.

*Suit the word to the action,
Suit the action to the word ...*⁷

In this action, the past is deconstructed and opens onto a future of possibilities.

*Time passes, time passes and the world is a disgrace
Theatre breaks the space of the past and the future
The present is a stage*

*Theater is not just a farce
The world is not illusion
Comedy is not just for fun
Tragedy is not just a lesson*

*Theatre in the streets
Theatre of the people
Mythical theatre
Everyday theatre
Today's drama*

*Comedy, tragedy, dramallion (bis)*⁸

In the play, as in life, we live in relationships. In our theater there are many "others". There are the other actors with whom I play; there are others who watch us play or participate; there are the archetypes who are others we inhabit and who inhabit us. All these others are my mirrors who show me who I am and who I am becoming. In my encounters with others and as I engage more deeply into this process, I discover within myself many different faces. ***C'est par l'autre que le sujet entre vraiment dans l'existence.***⁹ (Misrahi dans Buber, 1923/2012, p.16). ***Je m'accomplis au contact du "Tu", je deviens "Je" en disant "Tu". Toute vie véritable est rencontre.***¹⁰ (Buber, 1923/2012, p. 44). Sometimes I feel confronted by this other that reveals parts of me I would rather not see, or when an encounter reawakens old wounds. At the same time I sense very strongly that this is a gift, an opportunity to free myself.

⁷ Inspired by Shakespeare's "Hamlet"

⁸ "Le Dramallion", Junio Santos, (translated by actors of DioNyse-Montreal)

⁹ Free translation: It is through the encounter with the other, that the subject truly comes into existence.

¹⁰ Free translation: *I require a "You" in order to become. I become "I" when I say "You". All actual life is encounter.*

*Être défait par un autre est une nécessité primaire, une angoisse à coup sûr, mais aussi une chance - d'être interpellé, réclamé, lié à ce qui n'est pas moi, et aussi d'être ému, d'être obligé d'agir, de m'adresser ailleurs, et de ne plus faire ainsi du "je" autonome une sorte de possession.*¹¹ (Butler, 2007, p. 137)

I agree with Butler, that the other is a necessary passage towards healing. It is easier when we know that it is not the other who is causing me pain, but rather an encounter which is allowing unconscious processes to emerge. For is it not these same shadows of the unconscious that give form to our diseases and illnesses? Vitor Pordeus and other researchers (da Silveira, Basaglia, Laing, Arpin and Kirmayer, in Pordeus, 2015) invite us to question our health and disease paradigms by reminding us that physical and mental diseases are determined by cultural, historical and political factors.

Diseases are cultural and political productions simultaneously expressed through epigenetic historical alterations that mould our bodies. Besides that, accumulated scientific evidence demonstrates that we are capable of positively modifying even the most severe chronic psychosis through modifications in space, culture and political relations esthetical and ethical relations. (Pordeus, 2015, p. 24)

But to heal can be painful at times. If we are feeling fragile and needing support, Vitor, who is both actor and our guide in this adventure, is always available to listen to our stories or memories that emerge and ask to be heard. Also, after each of our practices or performances, we share in a circle, our experience of the event.

*We are a circle within a circle
Without a beginning and without an end (bis)*¹²

*Listen! Listen!
The other is already there ...
Welcome! Welcome!
Caring for the other, is caring for myself
Caring for myself is caring for the world
Caring for the world is caring for myself*¹³

Madness with method

To conclude this short narrative of my personal experience, I would like to say a few words about the method that Vitor has developed and the influences behind it.

¹¹ Free translation: *Being defeated by another is a necessity which causes anxiety for sure, but it is also an opportunity - of being called into action, invited, engaged with what is not me, and also to be moved, to be obliged to act, to speak other words, and thus no longer make the autonomous "I" a kind of possession.*

¹² "The Circle" of Pajé Amouri Gurgel

¹³ Song inspired by Nise da Silveira (by V. Pordeus, translated by actors of DioNyse-Montreal)

Vitor is the successor of Nise da Silveira, a Brazilian psychiatrist who founded in 1946 the Museum of Images of the Unconscious in Rio de Janeiro. This museum contains one of the largest collections of paintings, drawings and sculptures produced by people with severe mental illnesses. Da Silveira systematically demonstrated the therapeutic benefits of spontaneous creative expression in a caring environment. In the 50s she worked with Carl Jung, who showed us the importance of symbols and traditions in the human psyche and how our collective unconscious behaviors are determined by archetypes. For the past seven years, Vitor Pordeus has continued the work of Nise da Silveira through the "People's University of Art and Science", where he created the "Madness Hotel and Spa" and DioNyse Theatre, a collective of actors who continue to demonstrate the benefits of street theater, on the health of individuals and the community. (Pordeus, 2014, p. 48)

The SHABES method that Vitor developed, took shape through research and experimentation over a period of seven years. His method is rooted in mythology, theater, philosophy and initiatory traditions. When we know Vitor, we can see his deep respect for ancestors and tradition, for culture and for science. But he is first a healer. A shaman of modern times. Besides offering us this theatre and training workshop, he is always welcoming and generous of his time and his wisdom.

I have only begun my healing process. I continue this journey with curiosity and confidence, while rejoicing every step of the way for this wonderful discovery and opportunity ...

Thank you, Vitor...

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